

Computers for the rest of us

What to buy until you win the lottery.

Peter Roberts reports on a computer designed for the rest of us.

A machine you can afford to buy and run - the VZ300.

ON TELEVISION they have the advertisement with the catchy jingle - "When I win the lottery". In my case that is going to be difficult because I never have enough money to buy lottery tickets. But if I did have all the money in the world no doubt I would buy a GeeWhizzBang Mark III and big note it to all my friends.

I'll be able to do that on the same day I become a space pilot and go exploring on Jupiter. Until that day comes I will have to make do with a computer designed for the rest of us. A machine I am able to afford, buy and run.

Second hand machines always seem to me, rightly or wrongly, to be a bit suss, so I opted for a new computer - possibly, probably the cheapest computer available in Australia, the VZ 300 from Dick Smith Electronics.

Basically, all I wanted to do was to learn to program and have a bit of fun as I did so without it costing me an arm a leg. For this the VZ300 fills the bill perfectly.

Viz the Wiz - why do we always give our computers names? Are we trying to make them human? Is the ultimate humanised computer a robot? Is this where it is all heading? - is made in Hong Kong - in Block 1 of the Tai Ping Industrial Centre in Ting Kok Road which is in Nam Hang which is in Tai Po which is in the New Territories which is in Hong Kong - and comes with an instruction manual full of the spelling mistakes you expect with a Hong Kong machine. There are pages all the way through which say, "This page is purposely left blank" - something to do with the students of Paris, I suppose.

But the thoughts it includes, the basic idea, the information it gives the reader are all sound. In the introduction there is a neat piece of computer philosophy which is worth repeating.

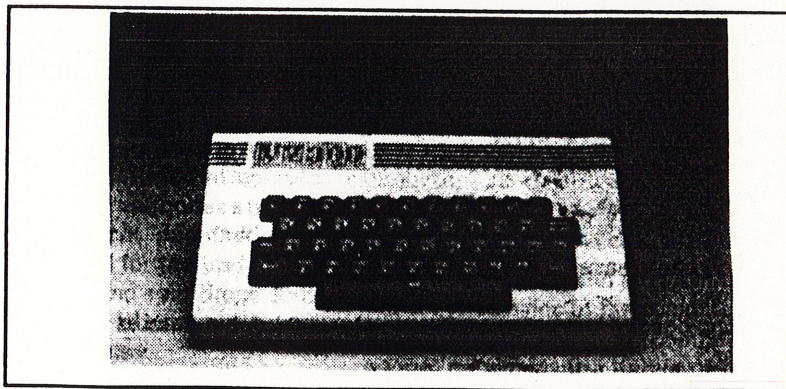
"The key to success is to try everything. It is not enough to read about it. You must do it. You don't learn to play the piano, type or swim by reading a book. You learn by doing. Don't worry about making mistakes. It is part of the learning process. If you make a mistake, just correct the mistake and continue. The computer doesn't worry about it, why should you? There is nothing that can be done from the keyboard that can damage your computer."

I have Viz lashed up to a colour television which has seen better days and every now and then gets the dreaded shudders with the screen giving a very neat imitation of a snowstorm at Chernobyl.

This doesn't worry me.

At least I have no one nagging at me that they want their daily ration of brain tranquiliser - "Prisoner", and will I please unplug my computer before I get done over.

So far my investment has only been for the computer, because the telly wasn't doing much anyway and I save and record the programs I



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write on to a daggy old tape recorder which was given to my sister to encourage her to work harder at school but despite years of abuse from grotty "Australian Crawl" tapes nevertheless works perfectly OK.

I once read a manual for another computer from Tandy which suggested that it was wise to save everything three times if you were using a tape recorder. I know tape is not perfect but that is silly. I save twice on two different tapes so that when I am loading I don't have to work my way through programs plus their backups which would be a bit of a drag.

The great step plus of the Viz is that it uses one of the better forms of Basic - Microsoft. You know what you are using because when you buy the machine you have to sign all sorts of dire statements which say you will be, at least, severely damaged if you let anyone else use it.

Everyone in computing has a quiet sneer at Basic, which is to amateurs what Cobol is to professionals. And it is true it is not as snazzy as C or TurboLogic or even Pascal. (I am not too sure about the last one. All I have seen of Pascal makes me very suspicious).

But it is perfectly adequate and at least, providing you use lots of REMS, you can go back and work out why you wrote a particular sub-routine some months after you wrote it. Hands up anyone who can do that with the contradictory cryptic meanderings of C.

Because this is a colour computer I can produce quite pretty results without any particular problems and the

handbook is extremely sensible in its instructions.

I am, of course, obsessed with winning on the horses and the fact that I can use decimals and some rather elegant mathematical formulas allows me to have hope that one day I will break the bookie's hearts.

Technically the Viz runs on a Z80A chip which was the pioneer of all those CP/M machines of yesterday. It is a brisk central processing unit and does not hang around especially when number crunching.

The Viz comes standard with 16K of memory although you can add expansion packs. This I refuse to do as I believe the only way to get tight well-written programs is to restrict the memory available. Shakespeare wrote his sonnets in the same way.

Dick Smith sell the Viz in quantities. They say they sell it mainly as a second machine to fathers who don't want their kids messing around with their serious computer.

I believe this underestimates the Viz and what it will do. It is a real computer at less than a hundred and fifty bucks. And it is a joy to program.

There are about seven zillion games programs available but as I like writing my own I haven't got round to testing them. Maybe next issue.

Below are listed a few of the programs you can get on cassette for the VZ300. You can see there is a good selection, and mostly the prices are really low:

Poker - \$4.95. Straight draw poker - you can bet, raise, call, bluff and fold.

Hangman - \$4.95. Educational game.

Blackjack - \$4.95. Well known card game, played against the computer, with three other players if you like.

Circus - \$9.50. You control two acrobats on a seesaw who must jump up and puncture floating balloons.

Blorhythm - \$4.95. Calculates your emotional, physical and intellectual highs and lows.

VZ-Invaders - \$9.50. Like the arcade favourite.

Matrix - \$4.95. Allows manipulation of data stored in arrays.

Introduction to Basic - \$13.95. Learn the commands and statements and how they are used.

Elementary Geometry - \$4.95. Covers all the important equations to provide you with a geometrical calculator.

Speed Reading - \$4.95. An easy-to-use method to improve your reading skills.

Planet Patrol - \$13.95. the VZ version of a popular arcade game.

Dear Sir/Madam,

Congratulation on such a well written magazine. Never before have I been so taken with your descriptions of the games you review.

One such game review was 'Spitfire' and after reading it I suddenly became jealous of the fact that I could not use it on my VZ-300.

Your review on the VZ-300 in issue one was great. You even went so far as to say that there might be a VZ-300 games review in the next issue ... there wasn't!!

I would say that a lot of your readers who own VZ-200 and 300 computers feel the same. I would also say that a lot of your readers are VZ-200 and 300 owners.

When are you going to give us what we want? Don't you think we are part of the computer world as well?

So I call for all VZ owners to stand up and be counted!

David Kennedy

Campsie, NSW

ED: All those standing say aye!

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